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President: Mr. Gurirab ..... (Namibia)

The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

Agenda item 165

Commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

The President: This morning the General Assembly, in accordance with the decisions taken at its 3rd plenary meeting on 17 September and its 33rd plenary meeting on 11 October 1999, is holding, under agenda item 165, the commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

When I spoke at the opening of this fifty-fourth session of the General Assembly in September, I described some major challenges that face us on the eve of the new millennium. Uppermost in my mind then, as today, was the plight of many millions of children in the world who continue to die of preventable causes; who are victimized by drugs, crime and sexual abuse; who continue to face a future of hunger, poverty and illiteracy; who are subjected to hazardous and exploitative work; who are targets of violence or victims of neglect; and, above all, who continue to be used as child soldiers to fight the bloody and destructive wars of adults.

With all this in mind, I am particularly pleased to deliver this statement today on the occasion of the commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the adoption by the General Assembly of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

There are, I am told, over 2 billion children in the world today: 2 billion precious fruit trees and beautiful flowers of the human family — our souls. Their protection and development are crucial to the future survival of humanity. We must not fail our children, because the consequences are unthinkable. What happens to children in their early years determines, for better or for worse, their growth and their place in society. This, in turn, has influence on their role and character; we are parents, and we know this. That is why so much of the future depends upon the rewarding opportunities and care that we provide for our children when they are young. They need special and priority attention for a variety of compelling reasons — moral, social and economic, as well as cultural.

Since the adoption of the Convention, children's interests are now placed higher on public and developmental agendas than ever before, and significant recognition of their rights is reflected in the initiatives that United Nations Member States undertake in fields such as public policy, law reform and enforcement and social security. At the same time, however, the process of globalization has sharply widened the economic and social gap between and within States, with women and children in the Third World being placed in a precarious position at the receiving end.

Most countries in the developing world are plagued by major economic problems, with bleak prospects for growth that complicate any prospects for fully realizing the rights of children. The worldwide external debt

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burden represents yet another major obstacle to social progress and caring for children. A child in the developing world is born with debt baggage averaging $417. Sub-Saharan Africa spends more on servicing its debt of over $200 billion than on the health and education of its many hundreds of millions of children. There is more: because of her gender, the girl child in particular suffers discrimination and abuse for a great part of her life. Moreover, the girl child faces deep traditional prejudices and is denied opportunities for equality, education, nutrition, health care and, often, survival itself. It is therefore important to take account of the special needs of the girl child.

The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action adopted a specific critical criterion of concern with regard to the girl child and agreed to the life-cycle approach that should be included in all programmes and policies aimed at benefiting the girl child. Because of gender discrimination and unceasing violence, millions of girls, like their mothers and sisters before them, continue to be denied their basic rights, which means they lose out on opportunities to participate fully as adults in the political, economic and social life of their countries — namely, power, wealth and access.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic is a global menace of almost unimaginable proportions; yet it is a killer monster to which the global community is still failing to provide the kind of concerted response that is so urgently needed. HIV/AIDS is a non-discriminatory enemy of humanity that respects no borders.

The scourge of war, with children and women as the primary victims, continues to threaten decades of political, economic and social gains, especially in Africa, driving millions away from their homes and countries, while subjecting many innocent children to unspeakable brutality. On 25 August 1999, during the Namibian presidency of the Security Council, I presided over an open debate on children and armed conflict. At the end of that debate, the Council adopted its first-ever resolution on the plight of children in armed conflict, resolution 1261 (1999), and requested the Secretary-General to report back in 2000 on its implementation.

The Security Council, *inter alia*,

> "Strongly condemn[ed] the targeting of children in situations of armed conflict, including killing and maiming, sexual violence, abduction and forced displacement, recruitment and use of children in armed conflict in violation of international law, ... and call[ed] on all parties concerned to put an end to such practices". (*Security Council resolution 1261 (1999), para. 2*)

I believe that the General Assembly, as well as the Economic and Social Council and other key bodies in the United Nations system, should follow suit and do even more. The General Assembly, for its part, must lead this crusade by example.

But such condemnation, though laudable, is not enough. Ugly and painful abuses continue today in many countries in the world that are currently engulfed in armed conflicts. It is for this reason that I call upon delegations present here to demonstrate their support for the peace and security agenda for children that was launched in February this year by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The Executive Director of UNICEF, Ms. Carol Bellamy, is a hard-working champion of the rights and welfare of children. She can always count on my cooperation and support. We are all in this together, because we are saving our own lives.

In the same vein, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Ambassador Olara Otunnu, has proposed practical measures to prevent or mitigate the suffering of children who are caught up in conflicts in many parts of the world. I encourage him to continue with his worldwide campaign on behalf of our children, the leaders of the twenty-first century and beyond.

The years 2001 to 2010 have been proclaimed by the General Assembly as the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World. We must translate that lofty declaration of intent into a viable plan of action, buttressing it with generous funds and resources and with unwavering commitment by the entire international community.

I want to seize this opportunity once again to call upon the General Assembly at this and all future sessions to ensure that the rights and well-being of our children are an ever-present responsibility all year round and that they are put on the front burner for action. I can hardly think of any better way for the General Assembly to fulfil the Charter's vision of a peaceful, just and prosperous world, and the Convention's promise of a better future for every child.

I call on the Deputy Secretary-General.

The Deputy Secretary-General: Today we have cause to rejoice, and I am happy to be here with the members of the General Assembly to celebrate. In a few days, the Convention on the Rights of the Child will be 10 years old — a child itself, really. It has already become the most widely ratified human rights instrument.

This is a wonderful victory. All children are now recognized by a near-universal, legally binding instrument as individuals with special needs, who are entitled to special protection. Maybe more important, they are recognized as individuals with dignity, who have the rights of full human beings. To many of us, this may seem almost too obvious for words, but it took until the last decade of the twentieth century to turn that recognition into an international Convention which spells out, for example, a child's right to be free from economic and sexual exploitation, to receive an education and to have access to health care. Redefining needs as rights is not merely a question of terminology. A right is something you can actually claim.

To achieve truly universal ratification of the Convention would be a fitting way to enter the new century, a century that will belong to the children of today. It is a concern to us all that the United States is one of the only two countries that have not yet ratified this pillar of human rights law, and I should like to take this opportunity to urge it to do so as soon as possible.

The ratification of the Convention by so many countries means that its principles are becoming part of national law everywhere, from Viet Nam to Tunisia, and from Portugal to Colombia. Countries are making school attendance compulsory, strengthening laws on child prostitution and pornography, adopting a minimum working age and affording immigrant and refugee children better protection against discrimination. In several States the Convention has been a factor in deciding court cases involving children.

The Convention has also inspired and guided the further strengthening of international standards on children's rights. Last June we all welcomed the adoption of the new International Labour Organization Convention No. 182 on the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour — forms of child labour which include debt bondage, the forced recruitment of children soldiers, child prostitution and the use of children for illegal activities.

In addition, efforts are under way to strengthen the Convention on the Rights of the Child itself through two optional protocols, on the involvement of children in armed conflict and on the sexual exploitation of children. I urge all Governments to support these efforts as a further step towards ending some of the most shocking and shameful violations of children's rights.

However, we shall not be judged as a world community by what we say we should or will do, but by what we actually do. In practice, there remain colossal obstacles to the universal protection of children's rights. And this is no wonder, since of all the difficult issues we deal with at the United Nations I cannot think of one, old or new, that does not have a child's face.

The greatest single enemy of children's rights is poverty. By keeping millions of children, especially girls, out of school, it denies them their right to primary education. By putting huge numbers to work, often in exploitative or harmful conditions, it denies them their right to rest and play, as well as their right to good health and well-being. By leaving many to fend for themselves on the streets, it deprives them of the right to be brought up by their families. And as malnutrition kills thousands every day, it even deprives them of their right to live.

(*spoke in French*)

If we really believe in the rights of children, we should fight with all our strength against poverty and for social development. If we really believe in the rights of children, we should prevent or settle as soon as we can the armed conflicts that make seven-year-old children into soldiers, that maim them, that orphan them, that make them refugees. We must exterminate the AIDS epidemic, which condemns newborns to death or to a pariah life, and which makes young adolescents into the heads of large families. We must eradicate drug trafficking and assure that the Internet does not facilitate the distribution of child pornography. We must stigmatize sexual tourism.

This disturbing list shows clearly that children's rights are not some abstraction. The absence of respect for them is a real tragedy, experienced day in and day out by the most vulnerable among us. For this reason, if we are to make the rights of children a reality, we must act in a wide range of fields. In other words, all the rights of the child are so intimately interlinked and so closely associated with peace and development that if we

succeed in guaranteeing respect for all the rights of all children everywhere, we will have radically changed the world for all human beings, of whatever age.

Highlighting the rights of children, therefore, necessarily means attacking the root causes of a whole set of problems that lie at the heart of the mission of the United Nations. The United Nations Population Fund, the International Labour Organization, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Development Programme, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and of course United Nations Children's Fund — almost all the United Nations agencies have a role to play. Today in peacekeeping operations and in humanitarian missions, the fate of children is officially a high priority. In the context of its thematic debates, the Security Council has focused on the situation of children. As for the Secretary-General, he took a decisive step when he excluded children under the age of 18 from participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations.

Nonetheless, these efforts are meaningless unless Governments and civil society take up the challenge. At all the major conferences of the nineties, the rights of children have been taken into account and have been reflected in the commitments made. I invite the Governments of all Member States to remain faithful to those commitments and to keep the situation of children very much in mind during follow-up conferences and the Millennium Summit. If Governments continue to integrate the provisions of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child into their national legislation, if they disseminate those provisions as widely as possible and, above all, if they really put into practice the great principles of the right to life and to development, of non-discrimination and of the primacy of children's interests, then States will have fulfilled their obligations.

But obviously the Convention is not just an international treaty binding the States that have signed it. Rather, it is a universal instrument that has permeated the collective consciousness and become the symbol of a world movement in favour of social progress. Whether in respect of tourism, the Internet, pharmaceuticals or sporting goods manufacturers, a new awareness and a sense of responsibility are leading today to concrete initiatives that are transforming the lives of millions of children. Whatever the price, this movement must continue; even more, it must grow, because children's rights are the business of everyone, of every family, every group, every school and every company, every State and every society.

The succeeding generations mentioned in the Charter are not only those in the distant future. The first are already among us — the children of today — and it is today, therefore, that we must start protecting them, not only from the scourge of warfare, but also from all violations of their fundamental rights as recognized in the Declaration and by its 191 signatories.

The President: I thank the Deputy Secretary-General for her statement.

Mr. Baali (Algeria) (*spoke in French*): I am speaking on behalf of the Group of African States.

Ten years ago, breaking with a shameful inaction vis-à-vis the children of the world, especially the hundreds of millions among them left to their own devices, with neither rights nor protection, robbed of their childhood and condemned to hopelessness, the international community finally adopted a Convention granting children specific rights and recognizing their place and role in society.

This celebration, beyond its commemorative aspect, reminds us once again of the gravity and growing urgency of the continuing, unacceptable fate of this vulnerable, neglected part of humanity.

Despite the progress made, the reality remains bleak and the prospects scarcely something to celebrate. Judge for yourselves: in this decade alone, more than 2 million children have been killed and millions of others wounded, mutilated, raped or disabled for life; 10 million have been seriously traumatized and will suffer the after-effects for the rest of their lives; 12 million, having lost their homes, are left to fend for themselves; 300,000 serve as cannon fodder in conflicts of which they understand neither the stakes nor causes; 800 children a year are killed or mutilated by anti-personnel and other land mines.

Furthermore, 12 million children under the age of five die each year of preventable diseases; 250 million children work to the point of exhaustion in clandestine sweatshops to bring home to needy families the meagre earnings of their labour and suffering; 130 million school-age children cannot attend school, while another 150 million are forced to quit by the fifth year of schooling. Finally, tens of millions of children are victims of malnutrition and famine and survive only to die because of war, violence, illness or society's neglect.

To what future can these children aspire, victims of war, hunger, lack of care and of love, orphans raised in refugee camps or in the violence of the streets, robbed of their innocence and deprived of their dreams, whose only memories of their stolen childhood will be scenes of atrocity, rape, promiscuity and poverty and who have no choice but to fight while other children their age have fun and play the simple games of childhood?

Faced with the tragedy experienced daily by tens of millions of children, many of whom are African, caught between the horrors of war and the immense cruelty of life, the United Nations has responsibilities to assume and a role to play.

If it is true that the international community has not remained completely inactive, as shown by its numerous actions taken over a number of years, it is no less true that these actions remain pathetically inadequate in the light of the gravity and urgency of the situation. From this point of view, the almost universal adoption and ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, for all those States or governmental and non-governmental organizations that have made protection of children their creed and their battle, is a major accomplishment that will be supported, consolidated and reinforced by the two optional protocols currently being worked out.

From this same point of view, we welcome the unanimous adoption at the eighty-seventh International Labour Conference of the International Labour Organization Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, which crowns the long struggle of all those who with determination and courage have undertaken to ban for ever this new form of slavery, all the more deplorable because it involves children.

Similarly, we welcome the remarkable and dedicated work of the United Nations Children's Fund in favour of the world's children. We also deeply appreciate the tireless work of Mr. Olara Otunnu, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict in alerting the international community to the urgent need for vigorous action to protect children from the consequences of our errant adult ways.

In this regard, I have the pleasure of underscoring the contribution of Africa to this universal movement in favour of the child and to recall here that Africa, where traditionally the child has a central place in the family and in society, has been a part of this movement, or served as the inspiration for it.

Indeed, very early on our continent took it upon itself to protect children and to provide them the conditions necessary for their development. Thus, in 1979 the member States of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) adopted in Monrovia the Declaration on the Rights and Well-being of the Child, and this was followed some 10 years later by the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which forbids the recruitment of children under 18 years of age and which in its preamble recognizes that

> "the child, due to the needs of his physical and mental development, requires particular care with regard to health, physical, mental, moral and social development, and requires legal protection in conditions of freedom, dignity and security".

I am pleased to announce that this Charter will enter into force next 28 November and that the next OAU summit, which will be held in Lomé, will undertake to establish a committee for the implementation of this important instrument. This will give new impetus to collective action in Africa in favour of the child.

In 1996 Africa's commitment to children was advanced with the same determination when the summit at Yaoundé adopted a resolution affirming that the use of children in armed conflicts was a violation of their rights and must be considered a war crime. Therefore it was logical that at the thirty-fifty Assembly of Heads of State and Government, held in Algiers in July 1999, Africa confirmed its firm and irreversible commitment to children. This was done through the adoption of several major decisions that it seems fitting and useful to briefly recall to this Assembly.

In its decision related to the ratification of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the Assembly launched an urgent appeal to States that had not yet signed or ratified the Charter to do so, and it further invited member States to work together with the United Nations Children's Fund and the secretariat of the OAU, within the framework of a protocol agreement, to accelerate the implementation of the instrument.

The work of the African conference on the use of child soldiers, held in Maputo last 19 to 22 April, was crowned by the adoption of a declaration which condemned the recruitment of children into the military and called for raising the minimum age for recruitment — and even voluntary enlistment — to 18 years. The Algiers Assembly adopted a decision

concerning that conference in which it praised its positive results; recommended the establishment of a special committee on the situation of children in armed conflicts; urged the member States to adopt and promote norms prohibiting the recruitment and use of child soldiers under 18 years of age; and invited the Secretary-General of the OAU to set up the appropriate mechanisms for combating this phenomenon with a view to drafting an international convention in this regard.

Finally, the Assembly appealed to all the member States and to the international community to lend their support to the psycho-social rehabilitation of children affected by the proliferation and circulation of and illicit trafficking in light weapons.

In sum, in calling for respect for the relevant international and regional instruments, in taking the necessary steps to prohibit the military recruitment of children under 18 years of age, and in adopting measures against the proliferation of and illicit trafficking in light weapons, the Assembly in Algiers showed the seriousness with which Africa is dealing with this problem. And, in so doing, the summit showed the way for the rest of the international community.

However, the work to be done is immense, and it is clear that Africa alone cannot resolve the problem of children affected by conflicts nor assume its obligations as regards child victims of underdevelopment, disease and destitution. Certainly Africa today has the political will. It has decided to make the coming year the year of peace and stability in Africa. For some months now it has been courageously and vigorously engaged in curbing conflicts that are tearing apart the continent and exhausting its energy. But it is clear above all that Africa lacks the capacity to succeed in these efforts on its own, without an effective mobilization of the international community and without the international community's firm support for Africa's efforts to resolve the conflicts, consolidate peace and stability throughout the continent, and reconstruct the economies damaged by the conflicts. Nor can Africa be successful as long as the lucrative arms business continues, as long as the resources of the continent continue to be pillaged, as long as sanctions imposed by the Security Council or the OAU continue to be violated, and as long as the international financial institutions and private investors continue their stinginess vis-à-vis Africa.

Finally we are seeing a healthy awareness which has stripped away the heavy coating of indifference to the unjust fate of children and which has truly galvanized the energies of all those who neither can nor wish to simply accept the ignoble way so many of the world's children have been treated.

In this context, the 25 August 1999 Security Council debate on children in armed conflict has opened several avenues that might be worth exploring for possible collective action. What is certain is that the international community must act, the sooner the better, so as to allow each child to enjoy his childhood far from battlefields, from sweatshops and from factories of multinational corporations.

The fact is that the only worthwhile approach to this problem is, on the one hand, to attack, in Africa in particular, the underlying causes of poor living conditions and conflicts — causes that go by the names of poverty, destitution and human suffering and which also provide most fertile soil for intolerance, hatred and violence — and, on the other hand, to work to raise and educate children in a way that promotes the culture of peace as well as dialogue and understanding among human beings.

May the international community finally assume its responsibilities — all of its responsibilities — to children, who are our most precious possession, so no child — wherever he may be, and whatever may be his race or religion — will suffer any longer from destitution, violence or the continuing indifference of adults.

The President: I give the floor to the representative of Viet Nam, who will speak on behalf of the Group of Asian States.

Mr. Pham Binh Minh (Viet Nam): It is a great honour for me to address the General Assembly today in my capacity as Chairman of the Asian Group on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the General Assembly's adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Let me welcome the presence of national delegations, representatives of United Nations institutions and agencies and other guests to this highly significant commemoration. We likewise note with pleasure that a multitude of events have been and will be organized in all parts of the world to mark this anniversary.

The adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its opening for signature 10 years ago were milestones in the United Nations determination to make the rights of the child legally binding and to create a legal framework for their protection and promotion. Within an unprecedentedly brief period of time, the Convention has

been ratified or acceded to by 191 States. This almost universal acceptance of the Convention not only shows that children's rights and interests are every nation's business, but also demonstrates the political will that exists towards the cause of child rights.

In this connection, we are proud to state that all Asian countries have acceded to the Convention and are exerting efforts to protect and promote the rights of their children. In many countries, to implement the Convention, national mechanisms have been established and national action plans have been worked out; communication programmes to raise public awareness of children's rights have been undertaken; new laws or amendments to existing laws have been introduced to harmonize national legislative provisions with the Convention; and concrete measures have been carried out for the development of children.

In order to review the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the General Assembly considers every year an agenda item under the title "Promotion and protection of the rights of children". We welcome and participate actively in the discussion on all the issues under this item, including those relating to children with disabilities; the prevention and eradication of the sale of children and of their sexual exploitation; the protection of children affected by armed conflict; refugee and internally displaced children; the elimination of the exploitation of child labour; and the plight of children living and working on the streets. These debates help us to assess the achievements made and to determine what should be done to overcome the obstacles or challenges.

In hailing the remarkable success of this Convention, we cannot fail to note the active role played by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in creating awareness of the principles and provisions of the Convention and providing recommendations to States parties on ways to address problems, including through international cooperation. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and its sister agencies in the United Nations have been closely cooperating to address child rights issues on the basis of the Plan of Action to strengthen the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

UNICEF's country programmes have been successful in many parts of the world, bringing effective and concrete assistance to millions of children, particularly those in need of special protection and from the developing countries. UNICEF is also active in supporting national efforts to implement the Convention, such as adopting laws and regulations; developing institutions and budgetary analyses that focus on children; collecting child-specific data; assessing the potential impact of policies on children; promoting a culture of respect for child rights, including the participation of children; and so on. I would like to take this perfect opportunity to express our appreciation to Mr. James Grant, former Executive Director of UNICEF, for his great contribution to the adoption of the Convention and the organization of the World Summit for Children. We also thank Ms. Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF, and her staff for her tireless efforts and effective contributions to the enormous work done by UNICEF and, thus, to the welfare of children throughout the world.

While commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, we must not fail to note that 130 million children in the world today do not have access to basic education; that 200 million children under the age of five are malnourished and 12 million under-five deaths occur every year due to malnutrition; that half of the world's 21 million refugees are children; and that over 20 million children have been displaced by war. Today, we also have to face the further complicated problems of child abuse and exploitation.

It is appropriate to say that the Convention has set in motion an ongoing process at all levels of society to transform children from simple objects to full subjects of law. However, in order to fully realize this process, strengthened efforts are warranted at both the national and international levels. We are here today to reaffirm our commitment to that endeavour.

The President: I call on the representative of Croatia, who will speak on behalf of the Group of Eastern European States.

Mr. Šimonović (Croatia): The tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child will provide the international community with a unique opportunity to take stock of its achievements to date and to prepare itself for the evolving challenges to be faced by children in the next century.

The entry into force of the Convention on the Rights of the Child on 2 September 1990 marked the culmination of nearly 70 years of efforts to bring the international community to recognize the special needs and vulnerability of children. The fact that this Convention is the most universally accepted human rights

instrument in history has important ramifications. Rather than a catalogue of rights, the Convention is an instrument for embedding a culture of respect for the basic needs of children, bolstered by the imperative of achieving the rights of all children everywhere without discrimination.

With its near-universal ratification, the Convention has become the centrepiece of international and national action to protect and promote the rights of the child. However, global mobilization is required to ensure that the spirit of the letter is transformed into reality. Ratification alone will not suffice; the well-being of children requires political action at the highest level.

In all of this, it should not be overlooked that the Committee on the Rights of the Child continues to play a crucial role in advocating and monitoring the implementation of the Convention by those Governments that have ratified it. The process of reporting to the Committee provides an important opportunity for each State to review how it is implementing the Convention. To this end, the Committee has consistently encouraged States to take special measures and develop special institutions for the promotion and protection of children's rights.

The Eastern European Group of States renders its full support to the work of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) as the leading agency for children within the United Nations system in its tireless mission to advocate the protection of children's rights and to establish children's rights as enduring principles and international standards of behaviour towards children. Like UNICEF, many other United Nations bodies are becoming increasingly involved in children's rights by adopting a rights-based approach in their methods of work. The Eastern European Group would also like to warmly commend the efforts of all the other important actors within the United Nations system who are striving with similar efforts to protect and promote the rights of the child.

On our path into the twenty-first century — one that has been paved by a decade of dramatic progress for children, including the birth of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the goals of the World Summit for Children — more needs to be done in order to bridge the gap between existing international norms and their actual adherence in the field of children's rights. Having regard to the long-standing work of the United Nations in this respect, many have been struck by the commitment and active participation of various actors within the United Nations family, in particular with UNICEF at the helm of the ongoing preparations for the follow-up to the World Summit for Children in the year 2001. The special session of the General Assembly in 2001 on the follow-up to the World Summit is envisaged as the most representative gathering for children the world has ever seen in its endeavours to establish a new agenda with updated goals for children for the twenty-first century.

The plight of children affected by armed conflicts is an extremely important and urgent issue when we discuss children's rights. Children in approximately 50 countries around the world are suffering in the midst of armed conflicts and their aftermath. The terrible consequences are all too visible, with over 2 million children having been killed in the last decade and over 20 million having been displaced by war. Flagrant violations of human rights and humanitarian law are all an affront to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The protection of children in armed conflict must be framed by standards and norms embodied in international instruments, which explicitly incorporate humanitarian law.

The draft optional protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict contains significant language to this effect. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the international community has made the fundamental mistake of rarely treating children as anything but victims. Lasting peace can come only through respect for human rights, starting with the rights of children, who have a crucial role to play as catalysts for peace.

As we enter the new millennium, concerted efforts towards poverty eradication must be undertaken so as to bridge the widening gap of disparities faced by children throughout the world and to try to enable them to realize all of their economic, social and cultural rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child has been powerful in galvanizing efforts to put an end to this abuse. The recent adoption of the International Labour Organization Convention 182 and Recommendation 190, concerning the prohibition and immediate action for the elimination of the worst forms of child labour, represent a significant step in the right direction. The challenges which remain are enormous, and the practical difficulties of changing the lives of child victims are great.

Implementation of children's rights at the national level also requires enormous and systematic efforts by national Governments to ensure that an enabling environment is created where all rights of all children are achieved. State Governments must take on an obligation under international law to implement the Convention, but

every sector of society needs to be involved if the Convention's principles and norms are to become reality.

The Convention does not bring change in the same way as a particular project in a particular country or neighbourhood. It works by bringing changes in countries' legislation, institutions and attitudes. The process may be slower, but the scale and consequences are far greater. We must therefore rededicate ourselves to identifying ways and means to fund the protection needs of children, especially where resources are limited, as is the case for many countries in transition. Despite the many difficulties of transition experienced by countries in our part of the world, progress has nevertheless been made in ensuring child survival, protection, development and participation. All the countries in the region have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, while several have created national programmes of action to implement the World Summit for Children year 2000 goals.

We all want to make a difference for our future generations, and our efforts must not stop with this commemoration. Hence, promoting children's rights must remain high on our agenda at the close of a decade marked by a multitude of achievements in the history of children's rights. Transforming this global commitment into a reality remains a task that must engage everyone. The international community has to continue and increase its efforts to guarantee the best interests of all our children in the twenty-first century.

Mr. Christmas (Saint Kitts and Nevis): I am happy for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Latin America and Caribbean Group on this occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the guiding light of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and as the tenth anniversary of the Convention coincides with the dawn of the new millennium, let us look back in gratitude and look forward with courage to face the challenges ahead.

Though the Convention on the Rights of the Child can be considered an offspring of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is obvious that human rights begin with child rights. If there is respect for child rights, the contagious effect is likely to spread to the rest of humanity.

It is a wonderful tribute to UNICEF and its partners that the nations of the world were so sensitized and mobilized to adopt the Convention on the Rights of the Child as their own because, without this ownership, these child rights would have been stillborn. Instead, the child and issues relating to children now figure prominently on the political agenda of the world, in general, and at the Latin America and Caribbean region, specifically.

If the objective was only to gain acceptance of child rights by the nations of the world, the victory would have been a hollow one, and meaningful realization of the rights would have been a distant dream.

These rights could not have been universally implemented and realized until more children had adequate access to education, the main ingredient for development; until health services and water and sanitation were accessible; and until some of the fundamental obstacles to development, such as wide income gaps, inequity in access to basic social services and armed conflict, were removed.

To the credit of UNICEF and its partners, the goals were agreed to at the World Summit for Children in 1990. These goals form a major part of UNICEF's country programmes, thereby complementing and giving practical effect to child rights. Thus, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the World Summit goals are different sides of the same coin. UNICEF must be congratulated for initiating this two-pronged approach. It works.

The tenth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is not necessarily a time for celebration, but a time for stock-taking and reflection, a pause along the development pathway to determine whether a course correction is necessary.

In the Latin America and Caribbean region, substantial progress has been made in the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its complementary World Summit goals.

Most countries of the region have reviewed their legislation to ensure that it is in compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. About half of these countries have adapted national laws to the Convention. Legal reform has been undertaken in many of these countries through the training of judges, public prosecutors, law enforcement agents and child protection workers.

In a number of countries, child rights issues have been debated and discussed as election issues. Children's

participation and their ability to voice their concerns in decisions and situations that affect their lives have grown throughout the region.

Several countries have demonstrated their commitment to increasing their support for basic services for children. At the same time, many countries of the region have established national bodies related to the rights of the child.

The region has witnessed remarkable achievements during the past decade in the area of children's health. For example, we have seen the eradication of polio, a 95 per cent reduction in measles deaths, the virtual elimination of neonatal tetanus and the universal iodization of salt for human consumption. The average infant mortality rate dropped from 51 per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 33 per 1,000 in 1998, and the rate for children under the age of five went from 60 to 41 in the same period.

Access to basic education has increased significantly, and primary school enrolment rates are about 87 per cent. The *State of the World's Children* report has indicated that the region has a higher enrolment rate than any other region in the developing world at the pre-primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, and that girls participate at rates equal to or higher than those for boys.

Although the Convention on the Rights of the Child has given impetus to actions in the region to eliminate child labour, the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1995 estimated that there were approximately 15 million working children under 15 years of age in the region. Thus, we welcome with eager anticipation the coming of the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, 2001-2010, as this should additionally highlight the plight of children.

Despite these positive elements, the challenges facing children are daunting. We have a wonderful opportunity as we stand at the threshold of the new millennium. As we clean the slate, as we turn to a new page, as we make a new resolution, let us put children first and permanently place them on the political agenda of every nation. Let the progress of our civilization be predicated on the well-being of our children. To lose a customer is to lose a battle. To lose this opportunity is to lose the war. Of the four things that do not come back, one is a neglected opportunity.

Mrs. Fritsche (Liechtenstein): This is a day of celebration. Today we mark the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This Convention and its near-universal ratification, as well as the work of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, have for the first time brought into sharp focus the human rights of children. It is my privilege to speak on this very special occasion on behalf of the Western European and other States Group.

There are many compelling reasons that led to the elaboration of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: children are individuals, and Governments have a responsibility to recognize their human rights at all levels of society; children are dependent on adults, and their developmental stage makes them particularly vulnerable; failing children results in high costs — whatever happens to children in their early years significantly influences their positive or negative development; and children generally have very limited opportunities to voice their own concerns and are rarely ever involved in decision-making. For these and many more reasons, Governments recognized that children needed to be given higher priority and careful attention.

However, the world has moved slowly to recognize the human rights of children. The League of Nations adopted the first Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1924. While the Charter of the United Nations speaks of promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stresses that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, it was in 1948 that the General Assembly adopted a brief seven-point declaration of the rights of the child. A decade later, the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child was adopted. Following a proposal by Poland, a working group to elaborate the Convention on the Rights of the Child was established in 1979, and on 20 November 1989 the General Assembly unanimously adopted the Convention, which entered into force in September 1990 after a very speedy process of signature and ratification.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a powerful instrument for the world's children and affirms that children are the subjects of rights, not simply objects of concern or beneficiaries of services. They are entitled to the action of our Governments, of institutions and of individuals. The best interest of the child — the phrase which best captures the spirit of the Convention — is to guide action in many areas where children are affected or involved.

We have to acknowledge that in some important respects the Convention does not provide the protection

which we had envisaged and hoped for. We would therefore like to highlight the important work of the two working groups of the Commission on Human Rights and to underline the need for an early conclusion of their work.

While the task of realizing children's rights is a universal one, the Convention on the Rights of the Child addresses primarily Governments. The Group of Western European and other States would like to commend the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which monitors the implementation of the Convention for its work. The Committee has been very influential in promoting a growing sensitivity and in creating a higher political priority for children. Unfortunately, the present composition of 10 members is insufficient to ensure a more rapid and efficient execution of the Committee's functions. We encourage the States parties to the Convention that have not yet ratified the amendment to article 43, paragraph 2, of the Convention, which increases the membership of the Committee from 10 to 18, to do so on an urgent basis in order to reach the two-thirds threshold required for the amendment to enter into force. Realizing the human rights of children will be for the benefit of all, a fulfilment of our duties and an investment in the future. In this regard, we look forward to the special session of the General Assembly in 2001 on the follow-up to the World Summit for Children and recognize the significance of the Convention in considering future action.

The President: I call on the representative of the United States of America, the host country.

Ms. King (United States of America): The year 1999 marks the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. One of the top priorities of any nation should be the enhancement and protection of the rights of children. Children constitute one of the most vulnerable groups within the boundaries of any State. They are victims of violence, disease, malnutrition and sexual exploitation. They represent over 50 per cent of the world's refugees, displaced persons and conflict victims. They are often separated from their families, deprived of education and, too frequently, forcibly recruited by armed factions. Millions of children under the age of 15 around the world are employed full- or part-time in what can be described as exploitative child labour. Children are at the mercy of the adults around them. They have little to say in their affairs. They cry out for help that is frequently not there.

The United States remains committed to the betterment of children nationally and internationally. As a nation, we place the highest priority on the well-being of children, not only at home, but around the world. Both our President and First Lady have spoken out on several occasions on the importance of improving the quality of life of children. Recently, President Clinton addressed the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Geneva on this issue. We strongly oppose exploitative child labour and view it as a human rights abuse. The United States is therefore is a strong supporter of the ILO Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, adopted last June. President Clinton has directed all federal agencies of the United States Government to make absolutely certain that they are not buying any products made with abusive child labour.

The President is also concerned about the heinous practice of trafficking in children, which for thousands of children around the world means bondage, rape, prostitution and physical brutality. A year ago he established a strategy which focuses on prevention, protection for victims and prosecution of traffickers. The world community must bond together to put an end to this despicable practice.

Actions speak louder than words. Our commitment to the protection of children's rights is unquestionable. We help children at risk through support for multilateral programmes, non-governmental organizations and a wide variety of official bilateral assistance and diplomatic initiatives. We are major supporters of many United Nations programmes that have a substantial focus on helping children, such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the United Nations Development Programme and the World Food Programme, just to name a few. At this point, I would like to join other speakers in congratulating Carol Bellamy and her wonderful staff at UNICEF for the work they do on behalf of children around the world.

Bilaterally, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been a major supporter of child programmes for 25 years. Today, more than 4 million child deaths are prevented annually due to critical life-saving health services provided by USAID.

Although the United States has not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, our actions to protect and defend children both at home and abroad

clearly demonstrate our commitment to the welfare of children.

The international community can remain assured that we, as a nation, stand ready to assist in any way we can to enhance and protect the human rights of children wherever they may be.

The President: The General Assembly has thus concluded the commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

May I take it that the Assembly decides to conclude its consideration of agenda item 165?

It was so decided.

The meeting rose at 11.35 a.m.